Squeaky Wheel at 20

The evolution of technologies in the past 200 years has radically transformed the ways we perceive and engage the world. The history of image and sound technologies- from photography and the telegraph to the Web - is the history of a struggle with space and time, two primary properties of video and new media.

When Dorothea Braemer, Director of Squeaky Wheel, asked me to write about Squeaky Wheel's 20th anniversary, I was excited by the opportunity to re-read all my old copies of *The Squealer*. It was amazing, all over again, to study the genesis of the media arts in the State, and Squeaky Wheel's place in that history. The Experimental TV Center's Video History Web showcases the important role that New York State has played in the evolution of media art. This tribute to Squeaky Wheel is informed by my personal interest in the history of media art. And it's a chance to brag about my hometown of Buffalo and the important media work that has been and continues to be done there.

Squeaky Wheel belongs with the second wave of media arts organizations, founded about 15 years after the first media arts organizations in the US were formed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. While this allowed Squeaky Wheel to work with mentors from among those founding organizations, learning from our many missteps, it also demanded that Squeaky Wheel define for itself a unique position in the field.

Background – The First Wave

Video technology appeared within the countercultural milieu of the 1960s - a political and social climate marked by concerns for democratic process, a critique of the capitalist economic system, radical questioning of existing power structures, and collective or collaborative organizing principles. The media field in its early formative years was a mass of contradictory impulses, with a variety of definitions, organizational models and survival strategies.

In a critique of the television and art worlds and the economic engines they served, artists rejected the normative structures in the art world and in corporate media and created more utopian systems. We rejected the distinction between artist and amateur; citizens became arts activists; art works became immaterial.

Artists and activists struggled to access the new media tools of production, as well as to the system of distribution. As personal video tools were introduced, independent media was seen as an alternative to the one-way production and delivery system of broadcast television. Video art evolved alongside the centralized one-way communications system of TV, then the dominant entertainment and information system. We believed the instruments of TV could be redefined - from tools of institutions of social and economic control into systems for creative activity - and a means of self-determination within a two-way interactive communications structure.

Video art also emerged as a reaction to an art world many felt to be exclusive, restrictive in terms of the definition of art and artist, and its audiences, and dominated by the "precious object".

In the 60s and 70s various organizing strategies emerged, in part as a means to address access to these new cinema tools.

Collaboration was identified as a successful economic strategy; the cost of early video instruments was beyond the reach of individual ownership. For example, a 1969 video recording system - B/W only, mono audio and no ability to play back the recording - would cost well over $6000 today. To keep pace with the rapid advances in technology, group ownership of some sort became necessary. "Production units" – whether co-ops, collectives or media arts organizations – also reflected the social and political Zeitgeist of the times.

Alternate media centers were being created throughout the US to provide the means of production, supported by a social environment which valued public and private support for arts and culture. In our State, the New York State Council on the Arts recognized very early the import of media in the arts, and became one of the first funding agencies in the country to support both new media organizations and artists. The Center was among a relatively small number of other groups throughout NYS to receive support from NYSCA in 1970-71.

The programs instituted by these organizations were often designed specifically to support cinema artists, education and exhibition programs to introduce people to the possibilities of the new technology, as well as free access for all.

Works were distributed in a variety of ways from bicycling 1/2" open reel tapes among organizations around the state to giving away work for free or trade. At the same time, art galleries marketed artists' works, with acquisition costs reflective more of the art world's concept of collectible objects rather than the reality of media art as reproducible data.

Many in the alternative media movement were committed to reaching mass audiences through broadcast distribution in an effort to achieve social and political change, participating in a system which offered few opportunities to present alternative content, voice and vision.

To provide direct linkage of content creation and distribution, artists' laboratories were attached to public broadcasting systems at several places in the country. While the majority of artists' works were never broadcast - often because of the corporate culture of the times, the resistance to the ideals of the radical counterculture of the 1960s, technical problems resulting from small format production, as well as conflicts with aesthetic values - the impulse on the part of many media artists was to reach mass audiences.

Many other artists, however, were interested in reaching specialized, smaller audiences. They dedicated energy to cable access, library distribution and the creation of alternative exhibition venues operating outside the boundaries of established formal art environments. This method allows us to present works tailored to smaller audiences, to "program on demand" for individuals, and to time-shift programming – to have individuals control their viewing of art works, at their own time, in their own spaces – without the mediation of the television or art worlds.

Early video manifested a dualist position – critiquing existing political, communications and arts cultures, while seeking to play an active role in those very institutions. But we all, in our own ways, wanted to talk back to the TV and to the interests which controlled it.

As the early experimental art and its forms were appropriated by dominant cultural practice, and as unconventional works became the norm, artists began to participate in the very worlds – broadcast TV and the art world - they critiqued.

In the beginning the field was small; we knew each other. The New York State Council on the Arts was a visionary leader, supporting and, some may argue, helping to invent, media art. NYSCA

nurtured the health of the field through its recognition of the importance of conversations among participants. NYSCA ensured that organizations and individuals convened on a regular basis – with town meetings, small conferences, informal symposia. We also created our own circles of communication – largely by phone or personal travel. There were organized tours, formal and informal meetings, bicycling of tapes and artists around the state – all to ensure our own continued growth and to provide public exposure for the art and makers.

The Second Wave - Squeaky Wheel

Squeaky Wheel was founded in 1986; Julie Zando served as its first Director. There were two important issues at work which influenced the founding and early evolution of Squeaky Wheel.

There was a serious and continuing crisis in funding, with large reductions at both the State and national levels in late 1980s and early 1990s. During the ten years from 1975-1985, NYSCA appropriations were basically static, while organizations were faced with increased demands for services and inflationary pressures. During the Regan years and the country's drift to the right, the NEA was under increased pressure to avoid the funding of individual art works which could be considered controversial.

Media Study/Buffalo, a major media arts center in Buffalo under the direction of Dr. Gerald O'Grady, was closed in 1985 after providing exemplary services to the regional, national and international independent film and media communities for 13 years.

In the Fall of 1985 NYSCA convened a meeting for about 70 people in Buffalo to analyze and discuss these situations. Squeaky Wheel rose out of the needs and interests of the independent media community in Western NY. Founding members included Tony Conrad and Chris Hill.

By 1989-90 there had been additional losses of major Upstate media arts organizations from Synapse in Syracuse to Portable Channel in Rochester. ETC was 'defunded' for one year by the NEA. The NYSCA 1989-90 budget was cut by 14%; the NYSCA 1991-92 budget was cut by 44%.

Squeaky Wheel was then only 4 years old, nurtured in an environment of rapidly changing cultural needs and technological innovations, as well as restrictive economic realities.

Hallmarks of Squeaky Wheel

In light of the many challenging circumstances Squeaky Wheel has faced over the past 20 years, the mission and programs of Squeaky Wheel exhibit a powerful consistency.

Location

The city of Buffalo has a long and rich history as a wealthy industrial city in Western New York, with wide-spread support of its cultural and educational institutions. Even in the midst of current struggles with the loss of industrial base, declining and aging population, and long-term economic stagnation, Buffalo continues to be vibrant, full of strong and powerful media arts activities from Hallwalls to CEPA, and to support a variety of new media arts activities.

Buffalo is a gateway city – a Janus looking West toward Middle America and East toward metropolitan New York. Squeaky Wheel has always helped to bridge this gap, working to engage disparate groups in meaningful and productive conversations.

Marguerite Knowles provides a wonderful concise history of media in Buffalo in "Mediascope Buffalo: The Moving Image In and Around Buffalo 1970-1995" (*The Squealer*, Vol. 11 No. 1 Spring 1996).

Collaboration and Community

Squeaky Wheel has always engaged in regional partnerships, both formal and informal, among organizations like the University of Buffalo, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Hallwalls and CEPA Gallery and encouraged collaborations among the media artists who make Western NY their home. Squeaky Wheel has a strong sense of community, with its commitment to the Western NY region and to the State as well.

As statewide resources dried up during the 1980s, Media Alliance - an advocacy organization formed in the late 1970s with significant participation by many Upstate organizations and intended as a coherent voice for media organizations in all parts of New York State - attempted to address the practical and philosophical similarities and differences in terms of resources and capacity, between the upstate and downstate communities. Media Alliance had historically attempted to represent all of the State, balancing the needs and concerns of Upstate and the New York metro area.

Tony Conrad's "The 'Upstate Issue' Primer: Buffalo, the Media Alliance and the Emergence of a Surprising New Decentralized Media Discourse" (*The Squealer*, June 1988) pointed to loss of Upstate members in Media Alliance, and noted that Media Alliance was perceived by many to primarily support NYC organizational and individual members. The article helped to focus attention on issues which were being put forward at the Upstate Media Conference series, organized by Squeaky Wheel, and which were also being discussed on a Statewide level with Media Alliance.

In 1986 the Media Alliance Annual Conference, held in NYC, had an Upstate caucus. With Directors Lisa Overton and later Robin White and Mona Jimenez, Media Alliance went on to help sustain a conversation about these substantive issues, by assisting in convenings which were felt be an important component of community-building around the State. The voice of Squeaky Wheel, its Board and members helped to guide this discussion.

Grass Roots
Squeaky Wheel is a bottom-up, member-based and member-driven organization, with an historically active and engaged Board of Directors and energetic and imaginative staff. They have and continue to extend a welcome to all.

Education
Squeaky Wheel's commitment to education is self-evident today and is apparent in early issues of *The Squealer*. The youth media workshops have consistently been an important part of Squeaky Wheel's programming and are a tribute to the value placed by Squeaky Wheel on media literacy and education.

Back issues of *The Squealer* are an important resource for the Center's work on the Video History Project. *The Squealer* has served not only as an information resource for the media community in WNY and the State, but has consistently published provocative and intellectually challenging articles about media. *The Squealer: State of Upstate,* an annual issue with profiles of all the Upstate media organizations, was first published in 1988. It remains today an important primary resource tool, providing self-described snapshots of Upstate media groups, and a historical lens through which we can see the changing landscape of media art.

Peer to Peer Networks
Squeaky Wheel established a series of Upstate Media Conferences in the late 1980s, which helped to bring together coalitions of media artists and organizations across Upstate NY, and eventually across the entire State. Squeaky Wheel announced the series at the close of the State University Film and Video Festival; the first was held on March 8, 1986 at the University of Buffalo.
There was another held in Rochester on May 31, 1986 at Visual Studies Workshop. The Spring 1993 Upstate Media Festival was held at Syracuse University, April 16-17, 1993; this was co-sponsored

by CNYPG/Cornell Cinema, Squeaky Wheel and Media Alliance, with organizational assistance by the Upstate Media Posse, with a leadership role played by Cheryl Jackson, then Director of Squeaky Wheel. A full description appeared in "The State of Upstate 1993", (*The Squealer*, Summer 1993). The Media Alliance Annual Conference – *Toward an Interactive Media Community*, held in New York , Nov 17-19, 1994, included an important "State of the Field" roundtable. The NYS Media Festival was held on the campus of Syracuse University on April 12 and 13, 1996.

Squeaky Wheel provided important services to each of these meetings – providing organizational support, assisting in communications, shaping agendas, reinvigorating communities, inspiring artists and helping to educate organizations.

Courage
Squeaky Wheel's formative years - an era of dwindling resources and increased expectations - encouraged an agility that has allowed the organization to reinvent itself - to be responsive to the changing needs of members, to the changing face of the regional community, to the constantly shifting cultural environment, and to the ceaseless alterations in the technological landscape.

Squeaky Wheel has always been fearless in their support of alternative content and process - a leader in the field of progressive media, supporting work and programs which address censorship, media rights and human rights, from AIDS to reproductive rights.

On a Personal Note - Linkages
I think of all the artists over the years who have had connections with both ETC and Squeaky Wheel whether working in residence, participating in grants or education programs, helping to organize meetings, being colleagues and friends. Some, but by no means all, include Barbara Lattanzi, Chris Hill, Armin Heurich, Larry Brose, Peer Bode, Cheryl Jackson, Meg Knowles, Alan Sondheim, Richard Wicka, Ellen Spiro, Nancy Golden, Kathy High, Maria Venuto, Ron Emhke, Sara Hornbacher, Ghen Zando Dennis, Courtney Grim, Brian Milbrand, Jody Lafond, Caroline Koebel, Lindsay Sampson, Wago Kreider, Nick Pietrocarlo, Roger Bourdeau, Elizabeth Licata, Joanna Raczynska, Andrew Deutsch, Kevin Pearson, Brian Springer, Annie Fergerson, Virocode, Torsten Burns, Kelly Spivy, Stephanie Gray, Judge Kindel, Pamela Hawkins, Carolyn Tennant, Dorothea Braemer, Carl Lee, Termite TV.

Thanks to all of you, past and present, who have worked so hard to keep Squeaky Wheel and the media arts field vital, risky, edgy, engaged, challenging and thought-provoking. We need you still.

Sherry Miller Hocking
Experimental Television Center
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